



Why buyers hate being told what to do

Harry Mills

The problem

Buyers detest being told what to do.

What to do about it

You can overcome buyer reactance by using simple autonomy reinforcing statements that maintain their freedom to say no.

Why it matters

Buyers so dislike being told what to do they will actively resist a recommendation even though they know it's in their best interest to follow it.

Why Buyers Hate Being Told What to Do

But You Are Free to Accept or Choose

In 2000, two French researchers set up an experiment in a shopping mall to test the persuasive impact of a single eight word sentence.

First, a researcher made a simple direct request to a number of individual shoppers' asked for money so he could catch the bus home.

The precise words he used were:

"Sorry Madam/Sir, would you have some coins to take the bus please?"

Then a researcher approached a second group of individual shoppers and added:

"But you are free to accept or refuse."

Remarkably, twice as many shoppers who heard the "But you are free to accept or refuse" at the end of the request answered yes to the request for money.

The 'But You Are Free' technique (BYAF) has now been tested in 42 studies involving 22,000 people. Across all the studies, a BYAF phrase doubled the odds that someone would say yes to a request.

The BYAF technique has increased donations to tsunami and land mine charities. One BYAF study staged in a nursing home found nursing home residents were much more likely to participate in activities with other residents.

The researchers had discovered a remarkable simple persuasion technique that was practical and easy to use, that had the potential to be applied in virtually any setting including sales.

The Freedom to Say No

The exact words used don't matter. Using the phrase, "but obviously don't feel obliged", works just as well as the standard, "but you are free". The phrases however must recognize the person's freedom to say "no".

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The Law of Psychological Reactance

The But You Are Free research is based on the Law of Psychological Reactance first put forward by Jack and Sharon Brehm in 1966. The Law of Psychological Reactance states most humans dislike being told what to do. “If someone tells you to do something, you probably won’t want to feel like it, even if you might have wanted to.” (2).

The Brehms and other researchers in dozens of studies showed that “people were likely to avoid what they had been told to choose and to choose what they had been told to avoid. That’s how much people dislike being told what to do.” (3).

Messages – even well intentioned ones – that negatively impact on a buyers or clients’ autonomy, restrict their choices, and infringe their freedom to say no, invariably encounter resistance.

How to Reinforce a Client's Autonomy

There are a number of ways you can reinforce a buyer’s autonomy. Here are some effective autonomy statements developed and tested by Yale University School of Medicine’s psychologist, Michael Pantalon.

- *“I think it’s a good idea, but that’s just me”* Acknowledging your idea is just your opinion gives the buyer the freedom to respond.
- *“There are pros and cons to both choices; only you can decide how things add up for you”* This statement reinforces the notion that the buyer controls the decision and that it is his alone.
- *“I know what I’d like to do”* This is another way of admitting you have an opinion but you are saying the buyer may prefer another way.
- *“If it were completely up to me, here’s what I’d like to see happen”* Again, you’re acknowledging your view is just an opinion and the right to decide lies with the buyer.

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Statements You Should Avoid

Here are some statements that will very likely ignite buyer resistance that you need to avoid:

- “*You’re going to have to make a decision*” You’re telling the buyer what he has to do.
- “*It’s up to you to do what you need to do*” Again, you’re telling the buyer what he needs to do.
- “*You’ve told me how much you want this*” You’re pushing my words back at me, but you’re not asking what I want. (4).

Sources:

1. Christopher J. Carpenter (2013): *A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of the “But You Are Free” Compliance-Gaining Technique*, Communication Studies, 64:1, 6-17
2. Michael V. Pantalon, *Instant Influence*, Headline, 2011, p. 26
3. Michael V. Pantalon, *Instant Influence*, Headline, 2011, p. 27
4. Michael V. Pantalon, *Instant Influence*, Headline, 2011, p. 53-54

Harry Mills is CEO of the Aha! Advantage and the author of 11 books on sales, marketing, persuasion and influence. This article is an adaption of a chapter from Harry’s book *The Aha! Advantage: The New Science of Sales Success*.

For more information on The Aha! Advantage’s research, please contact:

harry.mills@ahaadvantage.com

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